

Senator Bizzarro, Representative William Petitte, and respective members of the Appropriations Committee,

My name is Luz Feliz and I live in New Britain, Connecticut. I am the Young Adult Peer Leadership Coordinator for Join Rise Be, which is the statewide, peer-run initiative run through Advocacy Unlimited (www.advocacyunlimited.org).

Our mission is to share our experiences to influence change at the local, regional, and state levels, connect with our peers and community partners to reduce discrimination against young people, and to help cultivate the belief that recovery is possible and we all have the capacity to achieve success (www.joinrisebe.org).

As someone who identifies as being in recovery, I am here today to testify in support of the Governor's proposed budget. Specifically, I will be speaking to the DMHAS budget.

Although I am now in a position to help others, this has not always been the case, as I was once in a position where my mind was more powerful than my will to help myself, and I was constantly being told that I wouldn't be able to live outside of an institutional psychiatric setting. As a teenager, I was hospitalized for months on end, received multiple diagnoses, and spent an absurd amount of time on one-to-one safety precaution care. All the while, I still believed that what lied ahead was never-ending medication changes, constant sedation and four-point restraints due to my self-harm behavior. I didn't know what I was going to do, but I knew that there had to be other options out there that I wasn't seeing.

In the year 2015, my life was accidentally, yet positively altered. I decided to accompany my friend to a group at a local holistic healing center called Toivo, and after going the first time I've been affiliated with Advocacy Unlimited ever since.

Within this organization, I was able to find mutual support from peers who connected with me on a deep empathetic level simply because they've been through similar situations before. I was able to find my true self, and started learning to be okay with being genuinely me. Little by little, I was able to seek healthy alternatives to my self-harm behaviors, appropriately process past traumas and get help in a way that was right for my healing. Through this community connection, I was able to become a Warmline Operator, Warmline Coordinator, and now a Young Adult Peer Leadership Coordinator.

Connection to a community and peer support is so much more than being able to relate to someone who has been there, although it entails this as well. One of the additional benefits include being able to create programs such as the Statewide Young Adult Warmline; a phone-based peer support line people can call to feel heard and validated, or vent if they've had a rough day. Through our peer advocacy, we have developed the RISE Leadership trainings and are in the planning process of The Lotus Project. Both trainings have been designed to help create leaders and leadership pathways within DMHAS Young Adult Services and promote the idea of a growth mindset rather than a fixed mindset.

Along with my fellow colleagues here today, I ask that you protect funding for peer recovery services within the DMHAS budget, and we ask that you encourage DMHAS to expand funding for supports beyond clinical intervention.

I feel it is essential that all young adults are made aware of and given the chance to experience alternative ways to deal with the issues they're bombarded with on an everyday basis. They need and deserve access to alternatives supported through this proposed bill. Connection to a community definitely saved my life, and I hope you will help me to continuing helping save others.

Thank you for your time.